Mad in America
SCIENCE, PSYCHIATRY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

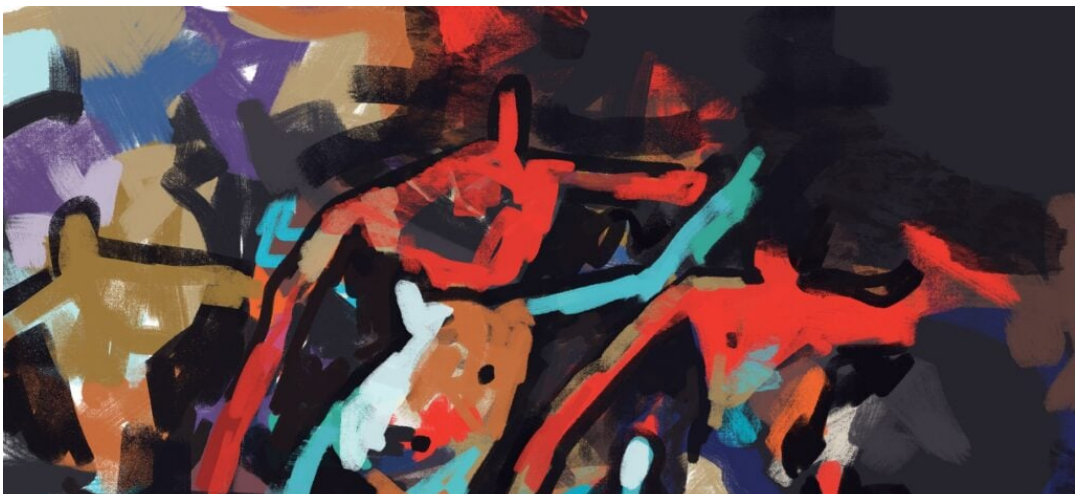
Withdrawal Psychosis and the Aftermath of Tragedy

By **Steve Anderson** - March 15, 2024

A crime that shocked a nation:

In sleepy Raurimu, a tiny settlement in New Zealand's central North Island, the Saturday morning peace was shattered on the 8th of February, 1997 when a young man from Wellington turned a shotgun onto a group of people staying at his family's ski and hunting lodge. Six people died that morning and another four were seriously wounded.

Twenty-four years old at the time, Stephen Anderson was arrested, naked in farmland not far from the scene at Raurimu, and later charged with six murders and four attempted murders. At a High Court trial in December 1997, he was found not guilty of the charges by reason of insanity and court ordered to undergo forensic mental health treatment as one of his country's most high-profile 'special patients.'



I am Steve Anderson. Much was written and said about my actions on that day, but the stories lacked context and were typically sensationalized or simply focused blame on the wrong things. I would like to offer a firsthand account with my own views of what went wrong. I hope that some valuable learning can come from me filling in the blanks and putting a human face to this life-changing and highly traumatic experience.

I have been receiving treatment with psychiatric drugs here in New Zealand since around April 1995. I have spent over two decades receiving forensic mental health treatment since the Raurimu tragedy of February 1997, much of it inpatient.

Believe it or not, I consider myself a reasonably average New Zealander. I like classic motorcars and the great outdoors, and I grew up making the most of New Zealand's spectacular natural environment. As a family we had trips overseas, and later I worked in the Camp America program, turning 19 years old in the process.

My initial contact with psychiatrists followed me being unhappy about the treatment I received at the hands of Wellington police after an arrest for disorderly behavior. It is fair to say that there had been some cracks forming in my mental health in the years preceding this event. I had been 'down' for some time, to the point of feeling at times that I did not want to be around. I was self-medicating with cannabis and socially used alcohol and occasionally some other street drugs.

My behavior got out of hand after my first work Christmas party. This occurred in December 1994. After drinking too much, and then getting into an altercation on the street, I was arrested and taken to Wellington Central police station where I was beaten while in police custody.

I am 51 now, and I have tried to put what is in the past behind me. An important point to mention early on is that I experienced my first taste of a psychotic episode *after* I started and then stopped taking psychiatric drugs. When these thoughts reached a crisis point in my mind, I was arrested while in this altered state of reality, assessed, and admitted to Pineview, an acute unit at Porirua Hospital in August 1995 following a car chase with local police. I had stopped taking my antipsychotic pills almost cold turkey some months earlier because I deemed certain side effects too difficult to manage alongside my work obligations. I had stopped taking Stelazine and had recently started and then stopped taking a one-month script for Aropax (an SSRI) that July just past.

A disturbing pattern of psychotic experiences and hospital admissions following the stopping of antipsychotic medications or the starting of SSRI drugs has been forming over the decades of my treatment with psychiatric drugs ever since.

My current treatment team does not openly acknowledge the pattern as anything significant other than, “If you don’t take your meds, you’ll get unwell.”

In the community, without my consent, I am currently being treated with IMI (intramuscular injection) medication to assure my compliance with treatment. I have always felt overmedicated. I seem to be sensitive to antipsychotics, and during treatment I have been at my best when taking only very modest doses of these medications. But as soon as I take nothing at all, a few months later I start to become psychotic.

The worst thing that occurred while off medication took place in February 1997 when I shot dead my father and five of his friends, seriously wounding another four, at Raurimu, a small township in New Zealand’s central North Island. I was floridly psychotic at the time. The story made international headlines. This was my second experience of a psychotic break, and I was most probably experiencing another withdrawal psychosis from the antipsychotic medication I had been prescribed but was no longer taking.

To give this story some more context, at the start of 1995 I had been working as a dental technician in a busy crown and bridge dental laboratory in Wellington city, after completing a diploma in dental technology at the close of 1994. I had

been a student at the Central Institute of Technology between 1992 and 1994. I had been down in mood for a significant period of my study years.

At the start of 1995, likely traumatized and suffering the after-effects of a blow to the head compliments of police, I went to see my family doctor. I told him what I could recall of what happened to me in the police station. This doctor had been my family general practitioner since I was an infant. I became tearful while relating the story during the consultation and my doctor said he considered me to be 'depressed.' I was 22 at the time, and with my consent, private appointments were arranged for me with a local psychiatrist who had a good reputation for working with children and young people.

I do not think the psychiatrist believed my story about being assaulted by police at the station in December 1994. In talking to him, I thought he would back me up and give me a clean bill of mental health. Years later, I learned the psychiatrist had allegedly blamed my experience on the cannabis I was perhaps overly fond of using at the time. A recurring theme, it would seem, over the years of treatment since. In 1995 I was discouraged from using cannabis and started on antidepressant and antipsychotic medication almost immediately upon beginning consultations with the psychiatrist.

I have since learned that CBD (cannabidiol, a non-psychoactive cannabinoid found in the cannabis plant) may have uses beyond what we could have hoped for in a drug, where not only is it antiviral, but it relieves anxiety, is likely neuroprotective, and has antipsychotic properties amongst a range of other medical applications. People require relief from their human sufferings, and the cannabis plant and its derivatives seem to have an important contribution to make to that end. In New Zealand, it has only been in the last few years that CBD oil and other products have been available to the patients who might benefit from their use. But such medications are not funded by the state and people must source private treatment.

Back in 1995, on the pharmaceutical drugs, I deteriorated. I became increasingly obsessed with winning my complaint against the police, about what had happened in December 1994 in their station. I hired a lawyer to help me with the complaint process, later involving the Police Complaints Authority as it was

known at the time, and I spent a lot of effort and energy writing down all I could recall.

I was living at my family home in Khandallah, Wellington. I started helping myself to alcohol on occasion. Drinking for the effect while writing at the computer and ruminating. I was struggling with motivation to get up in the morning and had problems at work like blurred vision as side effects of treatment with the pills.

I did not get anywhere with the police complaint. I received a letter from the PCA stating that my assault complaint against police “could not be established.”

After stopping the antipsychotics, I ended up in Pineview Acute Unit, Porirua Hospital, in August 1995, six months after seeing a psychiatrist, and eight months after my arrest for disorderly behavior. I was likely still traumatized by my encounter with police the previous December.

Wellington is a small place. In 1995 I was getting stopped by uniformed police regularly while out in my car, and my firearm’s license was quickly revoked by a team of the same officers I had complaints against. Things very close to home started turning up in police-themed media, and this pricked my guilty conscience about certain sensitivities in my past.

During my August 1995 involuntary hospital admission to Pineview, I was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and again prescribed antipsychotic pills by the public health system doctors. In the hospital records I was said to have ‘systematized and persecutory delusions.’

After my 1995 admission to hospital, I was trying to make sense of what had happened to me. My psychosis had a strong spiritual aspect to it. At the time I felt like some kind of prophet or modern-day messiah, and this is a common theme for people in a psychotic state when admitted to a psychiatric hospital. I was trapped in a dystopian nightmare and I wanted to wake people up to what I believed was really going on. Everyday people appeared brainwashed and oppressed by the system and it was my existential obligation to free them from the media’s grip on their minds. I had been restrained while in hospital and treated with IMI drugs. In the community, I took the meds as charted for a while

and then used them sporadically up until ceasing compliance with treatment almost completely sometime around October 1996. By the 8th of February 1997 I was floridly psychotic for the second time, and tragically, I acted on that distorted view of reality and committed a serious offense, killing those innocent people at our family's ski and hunting lodge at Raurimu.

The Raurimu tragedy affected real people and their friends and families. Understandably, there was a lot of anger directed at me and my surviving mother, Helen. A coroner's inquest essentially blamed my father, Neville, for not securing his firearms and ammunition effectively, and my care from mental health services was criticized. I wake to what has happened every day, and these days I must filter my every action through the memories and the fallout of what I did when I was psychotic as a twenty-four-year-old kid.

Over the years my diagnosis was changed to schizoid affective disorder, and at one time delusional disorder was suggested. With the passing of time and through learning new information, I have changed my mind about a few things too.

My doctors say my illness is characterized by delusions. At my Hamilton High Court multiple murder trial in December 1997, I was found 'not guilty by reason of insanity' of all charges, and the diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia became stuck fast even though I do not hear voices or experience any other psychiatric symptoms. New Zealanders were outraged that this tragedy had happened in our small and friendly nation, but no one has said anything about the effects of taking and stopping medication, then or since.

I spent years in hospital 'recovering' while receiving forensic mental health care. I took many medications and met many interesting people on both sides of the ledger, and I suspect I am not the only person to experience life-changing outcomes after trying to stop my treatment, never warned and ignorant of the fact that it could lead to psychosis. This country has seen several crimes and trials where the perpetrator has been taking, or had changes made to, or recently come off psychiatric medications.

Currently, I live independently in the community and give care to my aging mum.

I have written a book about my experience of all this. It is a unique story because usually, someone experiencing what I have dies during the process, and my book is a firsthand account, with a before and then the aftermath to my story.

I do not hold much hope of the Raurimu tragedy being seen by the world of psychiatry in the context I have just outlined — that is, as the consequence of stopping my medications and experiencing a withdrawal psychosis. My personal cannabis use was blamed for my offending in equal proportion with my 'paranoid schizophrenia.' Neither of which I accept as an adequate explanation for what I have done, while in an altered state of reality, and then 'been through' to make a functional recovery.

Many mental health professionals in New Zealand seem trapped in a paradigm of thinking from another time concerning cannabis and other drugs. I have consistently been labeled 'pro-cannabis' but really, I feel I am just anti-prohibition policy. Prohibition is a severe policy to deal with the cannabis-using community. The prohibition mentality seems unable to accept that the cannabis plant has any redeeming qualities. There is a difference between being pro-cannabis and giving the cannabis plant its long-established dues.

The things that assisted greatly with helping me recover were the basics like learning some meditation and mindfulness skills and practicing them. People who made a difference during my treatment were those who saw me and treated me as a person first, rather than some cluster of serious risks and objectionable symptoms.

These days I try to maintain my inner peace using some important techniques and skills taught to me by others as I have made my recovery. If I am angry, I try to apply the opponent mind of patience to my anger these days.

What happened has taught me a valuable lesson in humility. I am doing my best to live a peaceful, happy life in the community, but I feel my full recovery is still on hold. Trying to get off compulsory treatment with IMI medication in New Zealand presents its challenges, as the current medical mindset is rather 'risk averse.' Psychiatrists seem adept at initiating people to pills, syrups and injections, but do not appear very skilled at helping their patients come off them

again when they are no longer required.

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Steve Anderson

Steve was born in Wellington, New Zealand. He grew up in the well-to-do suburb of Khandallah, attended boarding school and graduated CIT with a diploma in Dental Technology. Soon after, conflict with local police and the introduction of medication saw him lose his job and then develop a psychosis a few months after ceasing his meds for fear of other side effects. Steve would experience another hospitalization after he shot dead six people, including his father, and wounded another four. He wrote *The Devil's Haircut*, a book about his experiences before and after the tragedy.